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Short progress report

Present and potential uses of Prestel by the medical and ancillary professions

There are currently about 16000 registered users of Prestel, British Telecom's viewdata service. Between them they have about 17000 Prestel receivers—purpose-built terminals, adapted TV sets, or adapted microcomputers—linked by ordinary telephone lines to a nation-wide network of information retrieval computers. The information stored is supplied by companies, associations or individuals, called 'information providers' (IPs), who are contracted directly to British Telecom; sub-IPs are in turn contracted to IPs. In total their number approaches 950, and they offer over 225 000 screenfuls, or 'pages', of information to users, searchable by numeric-choice menus.

A significant number of these pages are already of interest to the general practitioner. Following the general trend toward information technology there are indications that Prestel is about to develop into a major information collection and dissemination medium for the medical profession, though at present there are only about 300 sets in medical locations.

Market research by British Telecom has determined what items general practitioners would prefer to access via Prestel rather than through more traditional media. Most interest appears to be in information on drug interactions, side-effects and antidotes; in practice administration and management advice; in therapeutics and research news; computer programs; electronic mail; and in access to other computer systems via Prestel.

At present, besides information on drugs provided by a number of pharmaceutical companies, there are pages on the system detailing case studies and current research projects. There is also a substantial block of more administrative information: summaries of books, courses and procedures provided by bodies like the RCGP, the CIS, the Bureau of Medical Practitioner Affairs, the DHSS, and the Centre for Health Services Management; and information on locum vacancies, practice improvement, and practice administration.

Clearly, much of this information is of a specialized nature, and is held on Prestel in Closed User Groups (CUGs), which give the information provider complete control over who can access the database. Subscribing to the two major medical CUGs on Prestel is free, and restricted to bona fide members of the medical or ancillary professions.

Several further developments are envisaged:

(*a*) Negotiations over the provision of a drug information database are proceeding between representatives of Prestel, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), the British Medical Association (BMA), the pharmaceutical industry, central government, medical publishers, and poisons information units;

(*b*) A number of medical journals will soon be appearing in Prestel editions, following the example of the RCGP Journal;

(*c*) Computer programs can be written onto Prestel pages and distributed, as 'telesoftware', for downloading to suitably adapted microcomputers;

(*d*) Users can already leave messages for each other on one part of the Prestel computer network. By 1983, this electronic mailbox will be extended so that users can employ their local Prestel access node to send messages to the local node of any other Prestel user. Experiments are proceeding with an electronic version of the 'Yellow Card' adverse-reaction reporting system, and on electronic mail links between hospital pathology laboratories and practices;

(*e*) The Prestel Gateway facility, introduced in March of this year, allows private computer systems to be connected to the Prestel network.

It is important to realise that Prestel is as valuable for the opportunities it provides for *collecting* information as it is for *disseminating* it. For the last four years the RCGP and the Surrey University Epidemic Research Unit have been exploring possible information systems for general practitioners, and are now conducting a Prestel pilot study in the South West

Thames Region. Around 20 teaching and training practices are to be connected via Prestel to a private viewdata service, which in turn will be linked to the central data processing facilities of Surrey University. The practices will make use of Prestel's data collection features to dispatch information on morbidity and the incidence of drug side-effects and diseases to the Unit for analysis. A number of pharmaceutical companies are conducting similar clinical-assessment-in-practice trials using Prestel for ingathering results.

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